

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.

Word Games

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There are some who believe that games have no place in a serious language classroom and indeed, these people are right if in fact the game has no language learning objective. The aim of this article is to convince you that games can play an important role in language classrooms, if they have a clear learning objective that improves students' English language proficiency.

To begin, it is helpful to consider exactly what makes an activity a game. How does a game differ from just playing or relaxing? The primary difference is that games are structured and rule governed. In other words, there are guidelines as to how the activity is to be played and often there are winners and losers in games. Who wins or loses can be determined by skill, strength or luck.

Skeptics may ask what is the benefit of playing games as opposed to more traditional activities. There are several advantages. First, they can increase motivation in language learning in that they are often enjoyable with competition, goals and rules. Second, they can and indeed should further language learning. Third, they provide a change of pace from the more traditional classroom activities. And finally, they can encourage collaborative learning, as well as individualized learning.

In order to make these advantages clear, let us consider various games that could be played in a language classroom. In this case, we will focus on what we will call word games in that all the games are designed to increase students' vocabulary and their knowledge of how words are related to one another.

One type of word game is based on picture cards. For this game, teachers can use index card in which one side of the card has pictures of objects that deal with one topic such as snack foods, vegetables, hobbies, furniture, transportation and so on. On the other side are five to six wh-questions relating to the objects pictured on the other side of the card. For example, if the pictures deal with vegetables some sample questions might be the following.

- Which of these vegetables grows in the ground?
- Which vegetables are usually cooked before they are eaten?
- Which vegetable is the most expensive to buy?
- Which vegetable is the most nutritious?

The students can be asked to answer these questions in groups of two or three. When they finish, they check their answers against an answer key. The group that finishes the most cards with the most correct answers is the winning team.

Another way to use the cards is the alphabet game. For this game, students play as partners. To begin the team lists all of the letters of the alphabet from A to Z in a column. Their task is to find an English word for each letter that fits the theme on the picture card. For example, if the card deals with vegetables, they have to think of a vegetable that begins with each letter of the alphabet so A could be an artichoke, B a beet and C a carrot. The first team to have an item for each letter of the alphabet wins the game.

A final way to use the cards could be a jeopardy game. With this game, the emcee gives an answer such as “carrot” and Player 1 must think of a question that can only be answered by this item. If Player 1 succeeds, this person becomes the emcee. If Player 1 fails, Player 2 tries next.

Another kind of word game is based on comparing lexical items to increase students’ understanding of how words are related. One of these games is the homophone game. For this game, the teacher gives students a list of words that have homophones (i.e., words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings). For example, teachers could give students the following list of words: our, eight, hear, there, see, pale, way, piece, great, morning, waist, pray, toe, air, principal and witch. The first individual to have a homophone for each of these words is the winner.

A similar game could be played with antonyms so that students have to provide an antonym for various words such as the following: noisy, friend, deep, cause, amateur, modern, bless, coastal and victory. The same could be done with synonyms so that student must supply a synonym for each word that appears on the list. Another way to deal with synonym knowledge is to give students pairs of synonyms for which they must describe how they differ from one another. For example, students could be asked to describe how the following words differ.

- A meal and a feast
- A pet and an animal
- An accident and a catastrophe
- A holiday and a festival

All of the games listed above are quite easy to design. More importantly, they all develop students’ lexical knowledge and do so in a way in which students are involved in enjoyable collaborative or individual activities which can motivate students to expand their knowledge of English.

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